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SUBJECT: KYRGYZSTAN: AMBASSADOR ATTENDS BELL SANCTIFICATION
CEREMONY AT RECONSTRUCTED ORTHODOX CHURCH

REF: 2009 BISHKEK 1296

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: On January 13, the Ambassador attended a ceremony for the blessing of nine new bells at a newly reconstructed Russian Orthodox Church. The ceremony was also attended by First Lady Tatiana Bakiyeva. The appearance of the First Lady was notable as she does not make many public appearances and might have been a vehicle for increasing the profile of the Kyrgyz First Family. The event, however, was partially hijacked by a ham-handed effort by Russian diplomats to promote Russia. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (U) The blessing ceremony was for nine church bells donated to the newly reconstructed Russian Orthodox Church of the Nativity of the Virgin in Leninskoye Village. The bells were donated by a wealthy young Russian entrepreneur, Vladimir Kirik, who has resided for many years in Kyrgyzstan and is the head of the Sailing Federation of Kyrgyzstan. First Lady Tatyana Bakiyeva attended the ceremony, which was presided over by the Archbishop of Central Asia and Tashkent Vladimir.

¶3. (SBU) The First Lady, who rarely makes public appearances, arrived with only a driver and no apparent security. When she went into the crowd, most attendees did not seem to realize who she was and simply asked each other: "Who's that lady in the red hat?" The First Lady promptly took her place on the low wooden podium between Kirik and the Russian Charge d'Affaires. On her right, Kirik bowed and crossed himself

devoutly at every opportunity. By contrast, the Charge d'Affaires stood scowling and ram-rod straight.

¶4. (SBU) The Ambassador met Kirik at a later event and commented to him about the informal protocol of the ceremony, including lack of pomp and circumstance for the First Lady. He said that was intentional, as the Orthodox Church of Kyrgyzstan had insisted that this should be a simple ceremony for believers and not hijacked into a "pro-Bakiyev political event." However, he bemoaned loudly that the Russian Embassy had instead succeeded in hijacking the event. According to Kirik, only he and Tatyana Bakiyeva were supposed to share the podium. Instead, the Russian Charge d'Affaires arrived early and commandeered a place on it. No persuasion from event organizers could succeed in getting him to relinquish his perch. "The First Lady was a real trooper about that," concluded Kirik. "She didn't complain and just took it in stride."

¶5. (U) Leninskoye Village was founded 100 years ago by Russian speaking settlers from Moldova, Ukraine and Russia, and the Church of the Nativity of the Virgin was first built around that time. The church was destroyed during Stalin's rule and was only recently rebuilt with the help of the local government administration. The town has a population of 12,000 people, mainly of Russian ethnicity.

¶6. (SBU) COMMENT: The First Lady's participation in the ceremony was widely covered by the media and may be part of a strategy to raise the profile of the First Family. The government is also concerned with growing Islamic religious extremism (reftel) and this public event may have been aimed at demonstrating Kyrgyzstan's multi-ethnic and multi-religious character. END COMMENT.
GFOELLER